

# God and His Spirit in the Old Testament

There are many references to the spirit of God in the Old Testament, but we need to see these explicit Old Testament references to God's spirit against their background and in their context. We may then be able to avoid either missing aspects of the Old Testament's thinking which are relevant to an understanding of the Holy Spirit and his work, or reading too much into references to the spirit of God.

## The Holy Spirit and the Spirit in the Old Testament

When Jesus proclaimed, 'He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water"', John adds the interpretative comment, 'This he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (Jn 7.38-39). On this occasion, John tells us, and on others, Jesus and the Old Testament scriptures are speaking of the Holy Spirit and his work but are not doing so explicitly. The reason for this is that the coming of the Holy Spirit is only to happen as a consequence of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. When that comes about, the Holy Spirit will be experienced in a new way by all believers. He will come out into the open and then be understood to be the reality referred to under various terms by the scriptures and by Jesus.

So the Holy Spirit's person and work is often being referred to in the Old Testament when the spirit of God is not explicitly mentioned. In looking for Old Testament material relevant to an understanding of the Holy Spirit, then, we might actually look at a much broader range of passages than those which actually use the word 'spirit'.

Haggai 2.4-5 makes this particularly clear. To encourage the community after the exile to persist in the work of rebuilding God's temple, the Lord recalls and reaffirms the promise of his presence that he made long ago: 'Work, for I am with you, says Yahweh Almighty, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt' (cf. Ex 3.12, 14). He then adds, 'My spirit abides among you; fear not'. The purpose of these further words is not to add an extra reassurance, but to express the previous one in other words. The promise 'I will be with you' is fulfilled in the fact that 'my spirit abides among you'. The same assumption lies behind Isaiah 63.8-14. Here, too, the presence and activity which are referred to in the Pentateuch as simply those of God are attributed to God's spirit. Such passages imply that over the whole story of the Lord's work with his people in Old Testament times we are entitled to write, 'this is the story of the activity of God's spirit present among his people'—even though the Old Testament writers themselves do not generally express the matter in this way.

On the other hand, it is also possible to read too much into the passages that do refer explicitly to God's spirit. In the light of the experience of the Holy Spirit that began at Pentecost, Christians of New Testament times developed a broad understanding of the Spirit and his work. But we must be wary of reading back this developed understanding into the Old Testament. It is, of course, true that the Holy Spirit was active in Old Testament times, as we have already noted. The one God has always

been three persons. But before Christ he was not understood in trinitarian terms. Perhaps it was necessary that an understanding of God as three persons should be built on an understanding of God as one, so this is where the emphasis in the Old Testament lies.

But if we want to appreciate and learn from the way of God related to believers under the old covenant, we must seek to look at things the way they were led to understand them. It is for this reason (as well as for reasons of time and space!) that these study sections will not seek to go through all the Old Testament material on the presence and activity of God which might be connected with his spirit. We will confine ourselves to how the Old Testament itself understands God's spirit. And to remind ourselves of this aim, we will refrain from giving spirit a capital S, as modern translations often do, since that might actually encourage us to read back New Testament ideas into the Old Testament and thus to short-circuit our study of the Old Testament itself. (Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible do not distinguish between capital and small letters.)

## **The Spirit of a Person**

The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*. But this word refers to the spirit of a human being as well as the spirit of God, and it is also the standard Hebrew word for wind and one of the standard Hebrew words for breath. These meanings are interrelated, and the Old Testament sometimes plays on them (see especially Ezek 37.1 -14). The same is true of the equivalent Greek word *pneuma* used in the New Testament, and there is a similar play on 'spirit' and 'wind' in John 3.8 (the Holy Spirit comes like the wind at Pentecost, too), and on 'spirit' and 'breath' in John 20.22. It will help us to appreciate how the Old Testament understands the spirit of God if we examine these other meanings of *ruach*.

In his book on the Old Testament understanding of humanity, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, H. W. Wolff suggests that the Old Testament uses four particularly important words to designate humanity from various aspects. These are *nephesh*, *basar*, *leb*, and *ruach*. These words are usually translated soul, flesh, heart, and spirit, but each of these translations is misleading. Wolff suggests 'needy man', 'man in his infirmity', 'reasonable man', and (for *ruach*) 'man as he is empowered'. 'Spirit', that is, does not mean the inner, immaterial part of a person, and certainly not a still, central part of remote from outward, this-worldly life. A human being's spirit is the vital life which pushes the person into action. It is the person's energy, drive, and power. It shows itself in decisiveness, activity, excitement, and courage (cf. Ex 35.21; Num 14.24; Josh 5.1; Judg 15.19; Ezra 1.1, 5; Ps 51.10-12). Thus, Wolff suggests (p. 38), *ruach* denotes 'the energetic actions of the will'. A person of spirit is someone who can see what needs to be done and can do it, no matter what obstacles lie in the way.

## **The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God**

*Ruach*, then, is a word often applied to humanity—it means our physical breath or our personal dynamic. But because its meaning is connected with drive and power, of all the Old Testament's descriptions of humanity it is the one that takes us closest to God. *Nephesh*, *leb*, and other words (though not *basar*) are applied to God, but none as frequently as *ruach*. For God is the ultimate in energy, drive, power,

decisiveness, activity, effectiveness. Thus, as the human spirit encapsulates the personality and drive of the person, so God's spirit encapsulates God's personality and drive. Indeed, it suggests God's God-ness. What distinguishes God from human beings is spirit. 'The Egyptians are human and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit' (Is 31.3). Or, to make a contrary but still biblical point, what links God and humanity is spirit. In creating us, God breathes his spirit into us (Job 33.4; 34.14-15). In working through us, God sends his spirit upon or into us in a new way (Judg 3.10; 6.34; 14.6). It is sometimes difficult to be sure whether a writer is referring to God's spirit or ours (2 Kings 2.9-15; Ps 51.10-12) and the reason is perhaps because the spirit is the link between God and us. Our spirit is God's liveliness and energy in us. God's spirit is the dynamic power God shares with us. (On this theme, see further C. F. D. Moule, *The Holy Spirit*, ch. 2.)

As our breath is the outward expression of our spirit, so the wind is the outward expression of God's spirit. The activity of the wind is the personal activity of God, in creation, judgment, salvation, and renewal (Job 26.13; Is 40.7; Ex 14.21; 15.8, 10; Ezek 37.1-14; Gen 1.2 NEB).

## **The Spirit in Relation to God**

There is another significant implication of the way the Old Testament refers to God's spirit in relation to humanity and the world. God's spirit is God in action. Yet his spirit is a kind of extension of God, in some sense distinguishable from God—as breath is part of us yet distinguishable from us. Spirit shares this function with other attributes or 'extensions' of God. 1 Kings 8 talks about the presence of the *name* of Yahweh in the temple. The name of someone is the revelation of his character. Thus the presence of God's name means the presence of God in person—yet it is distinguishable from God (because clearly he must not seem to be localized in or confined to the temple). Proverbs 8.22-31 talks about the *wisdom* of Yahweh being alongside God in the work of creation. Clearly God's wisdom is part of God, yet here it is distinguished from God.

Terms such as the spirit, the wisdom, and the name of God thus fulfill an important function in the Old Testament's thinking. If a religion is to be meaningful, it has to understand God as in some way *both* the almighty, all-wise creator in heaven (transcendent, supreme, unchanging) *and* as one who is nevertheless involved in human life and relevant to our everyday concerns (immanent, condescending, adaptable). By the incarnation and the giving of the Holy Spirit the one true God, Yahweh the God of Israel, the creator and the Lord of hosts, demonstrates that he is involved as well as almighty. He shows, indeed, that these two are interwoven aspects of his one character—there is no disjunction between them. In the incarnate son God's power is made perfect in weakness. Through Pentecost spirit, a term for the power and dynamic of God, becomes the very means of God entering upon a new closeness of fellowship with humanity. But in the Old Testament times, biblical faith held together these two necessary truths about God (his absoluteness and his involvement) by speaking in terms of aspects of God which were semi-distinguishable from God. Among these terms spirit is perhaps the most profound in that it suggests both the essence of God in his dynamic power, and his power actively at work in men and in the world.

## Spirit and Other Ways of Speaking of God

There is one further aspect to the way the Old Testament uses terms for humanity which is illuminating for our understanding of the way it speaks of God. Terms such as *nephesh*, *basar*, and *leb* (and *ruach*) have definable meanings along the lines suggested above. But their meanings are closely related to each other and can overlap. What we in English mean by mind can be suggested by *ruach* and *nephesh* as well as by *leb*. There is a similar overlap when these terms (and others) are used of God. Note, for instance, Psalm 139.7-8:

Whither shall I go from thy *spirit*?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy *presence*?  
If I ascend to heaven, *thou* art there!

It makes little difference whether one speaks of God's spirit or breath (7a), God's presence or face (the same word in Hebrew) (7b), or simply God (8). The recollection of events at the exodus in Isaiah 63.7-14 offers an even more involved picture, since God's holy spirit (10,11), the spirit of Yahweh (14), his glorious arm (12), God in person as Israel's savior (8,9), and the angel of his presence or face (9) are all parallel ways of speaking of the Lord's own activity. Again, Kings speaks of Yahweh's spirit carrying Elijah off, and of Yahweh's hand being on Elijah, so that he could apparently race Ahab's chariot to Jezreel (1 Kings 18.12, 46). Similarly Ezekiel experiences Yahweh's hand on him and Yahweh's spirit moving him about, and the meaning of these expressions is closely related (Ezek 3.12-24; 8.1-3; 37.1).

To talk about God's spirit, then, is a central way of speaking of God in person in his distinctive, dynamic activity in this world. But the person and work of the spirit of God are not as clearly defined and distinguished in the Old Testament as they are after Pentecost. 'The spirit of God' is not a term with as precise a reference as it is in the New Testament. There is further reason here for not spelling spirit with a capital S in the Old Testament—we do not usually refer to the Hand of God or the Face of God.

Still less should the two Old Testament occurrences of the phrase 'the holy spirit' be taken as technical terms, as the phrase is in the New Testament. Indeed, their context makes this particularly clear. In Psalm 51.10-12 'holy spirit' is no more a technical term than 'steadfast spirit' or 'generous spirit'. In Isaiah 63.7-14 God's holy spirit is not clearly distinguished from God's arm or the angel of God's presence/face or God in person as the people's savior.

## Spirit as Person and Force

In as far as the spirit is God is present and active in person, the spirit's presence and action are personal. The spirit speaks (2 Sam 23.2), becomes impatient (Micah 2.7), can be grieved (Is 63.10).

But in so far as spirit, like breath or wind, is not itself a personal term, it can facilitate the making of other points about God's involvement with us. God's spirit can fill, like breath (Ex 28.3; Micah 3.8), can be poured out like water (Joel 2.28-29), can snatch up, like wind (Ezek 3.12, 14; 8.3; 11.1), can be transferred from one person to another, like clothing (Num 11.17, 20). Thus the fact that God is personal does not mean he can only deal with us (as human persons can) from outside. The non-personal ways of speaking show that God can penetrate and energize us (F. D.

Kidner, The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament', *Inter-Varsity* Summer 1968, p. 14).

## **God's Spirit at Work in God's World**

*a At creation* God's spirit (or God's wind) moved over the face of the deep (Gen 1.2) and ordered the heavens (Job 26.13). (The Job passage, and perhaps Genesis too, allude to the ancient Near Eastern myth according to which Marduk made use of the wind when he destroyed Tiamat, the power of evil.)

*b In history* It is by his spirit that God determines how to fulfill his purposes in the world—no-one has to advise God on how to run the world (Is 40.13).

*c In creating individuals* It is God's spirit or breath that gives human beings (or animals) life, by giving them breath, and God who thus ends life by withdrawing his spirit/breath (Job 33.4; 34.14; Ps 104.29-30; Eccl 12.7; Is 42.5; Gen 6.3). Someone who is alive has the spirit of God within (Job 27.3). Indeed, this is true of all creatures (Ps 104.29-30).

*d In people's lives* As it is by his spirit that God both creates and directs the world as a whole, so God's spirit enables human beings to direct their own lives as well as giving them that life at the beginning. 'It is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that makes them understand' (Job 32.8). It is because the spirit of God is in them that Joseph and Daniel can interpret dreams and make plans for their monarchs on the basis of them, in a way the official wise men of the court cannot match (Gen 41.38; Dan 4-5).

*e In the renewal of the world* Beyond judgment Isaiah 32.14-20 looks for a transformation of devastation into fruitfulness, righteousness, and peace, and this will be a consequence of the spirit being poured out from on high.

It is possible to exaggerate the link between the Holy Spirit and creation, as Michael Green warns (*I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, p28-29). Nevertheless this range of references to the activity of God's spirit in God's world is striking, and they certainly encourage us to try to bring together in our thinking God's activity in creation and God's activity in redemption. The world in which we seek to preach the gospel in the power of the Spirit is the world the Spirit was involved in from the beginning. The inward transformation of the world and its outward transformation are both the work of the Spirit. The Spirit whose power we know in our lives is the Spirit by whom God is working out his purposes in the world. The Spirit whom we long to see indwell men is the one who finds a natural home there because he belonged there from the beginning. When we use our minds to work out sensible plans for our lives or for our work, then (as long as we are committed to going God's way) we are thereby seeking to follow the Spirit. 'In his Spirit God deals with his creation not from far away but from within' (F. D. Kidner, The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament', *Inter-Varsity* Summer 1968, p. 13). The use of *ruach* reminded men 'that by the terms of the creation their world was linked to the supra-sensory world of God' (Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* II, p. 133).

## God's Spirit at Work among God's People

a *In redeeming them* In Isaiah 63.7-14, as a preliminary to pleading with God to act again to restore his people, the prophet recalls God's original act of redemption from slavery in Egypt. On that occasion he 'put in the midst of them his holy spirit' (v11) and acted in dynamic power at the sea of reeds. Isaiah refers to the dividing of the waters (v12) and probably has in mind the blast of God's breath that held the waters back for Israel but let them fall on Egypt (Ex 15.8,10; 14.21). In Isaiah 63 it was also Yahweh's spirit who 'gave them rest' (v14). This may only refer to getting to the other side of the Reed Sea, but more likely it denotes finding 'rest' in the land of promise.

b *In directing them* Looking back to the same period, Nehemiah in his prayer refers to the giving of God's 'good spirit' to instruct them (Neh 9.20). The reference seems to be not to the instruction in God's demands at Sinai (referred to earlier in v13-14) but to God's subsequent direction of his people as they journeyed through the wilderness.

c *In dwelling among them* The experience of Yahweh's presence and activity at the exodus was to be continued in her everyday life, and this is occasionally described in terms of the presence of God's spirit. Haggai encourages people, "'Work, for I am with you,'" says Yahweh Almighty, "according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you'" (Hag 2.4-5). Zechariah warns Zerubbabel to rely on Yahweh's spirit, not on human power or might (Zech 4.6).

d *In guiding them* As the initial presence of God's spirit manifested itself in guidance as well as activity. Israel's policies are therefore to be the ones that Yahweh's spirit gives, not mere human ones (Is 30.1). The prayer, 'Teach me to do thy will... let thy good spirit lead me on a level path' (Ps 143.10) is bound to be answered.

e *In judging them* But what if the power and instruction of God's spirit are ignored? From the beginning God's people 'rebelled and grieved his holy spirit' (Is 63.10). Aware of her sin, she may then feel contrary emotions. One is fear that God may withdraw the presence of his holy spirit from her (Ps 51.11). (Ps 51 may have begun life as the king's prayer, but v18-19 show that it was used in the exile as the whole people's prayer). The other possible emotion is a desire to escape from the presence of God's spirit—impossible though that is (Ps 139.7). (The point about the talk of escaping God in Ps 139 is that if we are guilty of the wickedness from which we disassociate ourselves in vv. 19-24, we would need to try to get away from God—but we know we cannot.) To want to escape God's spirit is an appropriate desire because Yahweh's response when his people grieve his holy spirit is to send among them a burning, judging spirit (Is 4.4). Thus his people under judgment are like grass that Yahweh's breath has scorched brown (Is 40.7).

f *In renewing them* Acknowledging her sin and praying for cleansing, she asks God not merely to refrain from withdrawing his holy spirit from her, but also to renew her with a steadfast spirit and uphold her with a generous spirit (Ps 51.10-12). (The reference throughout those verses is to God's spirit, which is steadfast, holy, and generous, acting on the people's spirit, making it like God's.) The same point appears as God's promise in Ezekiel 36-37. God will put a new spirit within her,

his own spirit, so that she will live a life of obedience to his commands (36.26-27; 11.19-20). God's breath/ wind/spirit will give new life to the apparently dead nation (37.1-14). Again, Isaiah 44.1 -5 speaks of a pouring out of God's spirit on Jacob's descendants which will bring about new growth 'like grass amid waters, like willows by flowing streams'; v. 4 probably implies that this includes non-Israelites coming to acknowledge Yahweh and join Israel. Further, when Zechariah says that God's spirit has been 'set at rest' in Babylon (Zech 6.8), he probably means that the spirit has begun in Babylon the work of moving the people in exile to concern themselves with the rebuilding of God's temple in Jerusalem (v15). These Old Testament references to the activity of God's spirit among God's people confirm and amplify the New Testament treatment of this theme. We note that the spirit's activity is connected with every aspect of the people's life with God. This includes both the 'punctiliar', once-for-all redemptive events and the living of ongoing life. It includes the negative (God's judgment) as well as the positive. It includes the challenge to 'get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit' (Ezek 18.31) as well as the promise of these.

It also includes one remarkable promise which is too general and all-embracing to be confined to one of the subheadings above: 'As for me, this is my covenant with them, says Yahweh. My spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says Yahweh, from this time forth and for evermore' (Is 59.21).

## **God's Spirit at Work on God's Servants**

a *Craftsmanship* It is striking to find that the first Old Testament reference to a filling with God's spirit for a particular task refers to the equipping of Bezalel with skills of various kinds for the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex 35.30-35). Chronicles also attributes to the spirit the plans for the temple which David conceived and passed on to Solomon (1 Chr 28.12). The RSV translates *ruach* here as 'mind', however, and we note again that 'supernatural' and 'natural' interact. The Holy Spirit gives gifts and potentials in creation and then draws them out from the person who is open to God (and works at it).

b *Leadership* We are told only incidentally that the spirit was on Moses, when God 'took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders' (Num 11.25). The purpose of this is so that they can more effectively share the excessive burden of leadership that Moses bears (vv. 14-15). Joshua is one 'in whom is the spirit' and is therefore fit to be appointed as Moses' successor (Num 27.18), and one 'full of the spirit of wisdom' whom Israel therefore obeys as they had Moses (Dt 34.9). As we shall note, other types of leaders such as liberators and prophets were also men of the spirit, but is regularly 'charismatic' rather than 'institutional' figures that are described in these terms. It is unknown, powerless men who are transformed by Yahweh's spirit. The spirit is characteristically involved with judges and prophets, not kings and priests who have authority anyway (cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* II, p51 -53). When the spirit does come to be spoken of in terms of a permanent presence, this seems to apply to the people as a whole rather than to individual leaders (cf. Hag 2.5; Is 59.21).

c *Prophesying* Prophesying is mentioned as a by-product of being filled with God's spirit (Num 11.25-29; 1 Sam 10.6, 10; 19.20-24). What it seems to mean here is

behaving like a prophet (ecstatically?) rather than bringing specific messages. To prophesy is of interest as an evidence of the presence of God's spirit, rather than because of the content of the prophecies given. (Does it refer to tongues?) Moses expresses the longing that all God's people should prophesy in this way (Num 11.29) and Joel promises that one day they will (Joel 2.28-29). Strange behavior that reflects and evidences the presence and activity of God's spirit appears later in the stories of the prophets, especially Elijah, Elisha, and Ezekiel. Elijah has a reputation for being carried off by God's spirit, and Elisha, having asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, is able to cross the Jordan miraculously (1 Kings 18.12; 2 Kings 2.9-16). Ezekiel frequently speaks of being taken off by God's spirit (2.2; 3.12, 14; 8.3; 11.1). But like other 'spiritual gifts', prophesying can be the result of other spirits than Yahweh's (1 Kings 18.29)—or can be the result of Yahweh sending an evil spirit on someone (1 Sam 18.10; 'raved' RSV is the very usually translated 'prophesied').

*d Liberation* A major theme of the book of Judges is God's repeated rescue of his people from bondage by means of a liberator who acted when the spirit of Yahweh came upon them (e.g., Judg 3.10). To 'judge' Israel here means to act decisively so as to deliver Israel from oppression. The coming of God's spirit enabled people to act with supernatural power, so that God seemed to have taken hold of them and to work directly through them. Thus the spirit 'took possession of Gideon' (6.34) or 'came mightily upon' Samson (14.6, 19; 15.14), Saul (1 Sam 10.6, 10; 11.6), and David (16.13). But Saul disobeys God and is rejected by God. Reasonably enough 'the spirit of Yahweh tormented him' (1 Sam 16.14). The kings as a whole tend to fall very short of Yahweh's vision of justice, and thus it becomes a hope for the future that there will be one on whom the spirit of Yahweh will rest, enabling him to rule with a spirit of wisdom, reverence, and justice (Is 11.1-5; 28.6). The vision of the servant of Yahweh is of one who fulfills this ideal for the sake of the whole world, as the spirit of Yahweh rests on him (Is 42.1-4).

*e Prophecy* 'Thou didst warn them by thy spirit through thy prophets' (Neh 9.30; cf. Zech 7.12). Already with the words of Balaam prophetic messages are asserted to come because 'the spirit of God came upon him' (Num 24.2). David begins his 'oracle', 'the spirit of Yahweh speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue' (2 Sam 23.1-2). 2 Chronicles describes a series of occasions when the spirit of God came upon a priest, a Levite, or a private individual (15.1; 20.14; 24.20) with a message to king or people challenging them to repentance, trust, or obedience. When the 'writing prophets' refer to the spirit, they do not seem to speak of the spirit as the giver of their words so much as the one who stimulates them to speak and gives them boldness to do so. The connection between 'prophesying' (behavior that is visibly spirit-induced) and 'prophecy' appears here. Micah speaks of himself as 'filled with power, with the spirit of Yahweh, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin' (3.8). He contrasts this confrontational ministry with the false reassurances offered by other prophets. A century later, Jeremiah avoids referring to God's spirit at all—perhaps because these other prophets, if they claimed to speak by Yahweh's spirit, had 'devalued the currency' of such claims (cf. the jibe of Hos 9.7). Since prophecy can be produced by a lying spirit, what counts is whether a person has been 'admitted directly into Yahweh's company



(Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* II, p. 56). On the other hand, there is no 'anti-spirit polemic' in the prophets, and Ezekiel, as we have noted, very frequently refers to the spirit's activity in his life (2.2; 3.12-24; 11.1, 24; 43.5) - though the spirit is more his means of transport than his means of revelation! Then in Isaiah 61 the speaker describes himself as commissioned by 'the spirit of the Lord Yahweh' to bring a message of consolation to the downcast (cf. also Is 48.16).

We began this study by noting that the Old Testament, and Jesus himself, refer explicitly to the spirit of God rather less than the post-Pentecost church does. We may close them by noting, however, that Jesus does see and speak of his ministry in the light of the way the Old Testament speaks of the spirit of God. The prophetic testimony in Isaiah 61 is one he applies to himself (Lk 4.16-21). It is fulfilled in him. He is the second Adam in-breathed by God's spirit, the prophet par excellence impelled by God's spirit, and the one through whose ministry the spirit of God comes to indwell the people of God in a new way.